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NSC FOR ABRAMS/DORAN/MARCHESE/HARDING

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SUBJECT: SAUDI AMBASSADOR DOWNBEAT ON IRAN-SAUDI TALKS ON  
LEBANON

Classified By: Jeffrey Feltman, Ambassador, per 1.4 (b) and (d).

¶1. (S) While acknowledging that he did not yet have a full read-out of Saudi-Iranian contacts, Saudi Ambassador to Lebanon Abdulaziz Khoja told Ambassador Feltman in a 1/25 meeting that he was "very pessimistic" about developments in Lebanon. He noted that he was leaving an hour later to fly to Riyadh to hear first hand from Prince Bandar bin Sultan about Bandar's meetings the previous day and evening in Iran.

But, Khoja said, what he had received so far was not encouraging: Bandar, calling from Teheran, had been understandably circumspect about the substance of his meetings, given the certainty of surveillance devices on the phone lines. But his tone was "tired and depressed," Khoja said. Khoja said that, upon his return to Beirut in a day or two, he would provide a full briefing to the Ambassador.

¶2. (S) Khoja said that Saudi Arabia's strategy to work toward a compromise in Lebanon was not working. The kingdom had counted on exploiting a basic difference between Iran and Syria. While Syria prefers chaos in Lebanon to a Siniora/March 14 government that will establish the Special Tribunal for Lebanon, Iran is the stronger partner, with more influence over Hizballah. And Iran has no interest in a Sunni-Shia conflict. So, Khoja said, the Saudis hoped to use Iran as a moderating influence on Syria. But, according to the Iranian Ambassador in Beirut, the Iranians have now decided to defer to Syria regarding Lebanon policy. The Syrians convinced Iran that Lebanon is Syria's backyard. With Iran agreeing to step back, Syria now has "practically a free hand" in Lebanon. Hizballah, like Iran, is not particularly interested in a Sunni-Shia conflict. But Hizballah is deferring to Syrian orders and to the desire of more radical pro-Syria Lebanese politicians like Suleiman Franjeh and Michel Aoun.

¶3. (S) Khoja said that Parliament Speaker Nabih Berri has approached him (as Berri has approached Ambassador Feltman) to ask that the international community convince the March 14 leaders to agree to freeze the tribunal now; in exchange, Berri will use his influence to calm the street. Otherwise, the situation will get far worse, and fast. But, Khoja said, the crisis would not end if March 14 agrees to freeze the tribunal for now. Berri told Khoja that, once the tribunal is frozen, the opposition parties will insist on either the 19-11 cabinet split that would give them the blocking/toppling minority or a 19-10-1 split, in which the "neutral" minister comes from their ranks. The pro-Syria March 8-Aoun opposition is not offering the majority any concession except to remove their people from the street,

Khoja complained.

14. (S) Khoja said that, with the concurrence of his government, he has cut off all dialogue with Hizballah. Saudi Arabia has also dropped the notion of inviting Michel Aoun to the kingdom. "We are in for very bad times," he concluded. Syria has decided to "destroy" Lebanon, pitting various groups against each other until the Lebanese ask the Syrians to come back to end the bloodshed. Siniora and March 14 might have won various battles so far, Khoja said, but he questioned whether the GOL and the March 14 forces had the strength to sustain the fight over the long term. Whispering to the Ambassador, Khoja said that "we must help Saad (Hariri), Walid (Jumblatt), and even (Samir) Geagea," with money and arms. (Note: The two Ambassadors met a couple of hours before the Sunni-Shia student clashes broke out that have subsequently spread from the university area to the airport road, effectively throwing coverage of Paris III off the media airwaves. End note.)

FELTMAN